

Babysteps in Belief-Building

BY DAN GRILIOPOULOS

AS WORLDBUILDERS, WE know that worlds aren't just bricks and mortar. They're people, they're art, they're history.

Most pertinently to this article, they're ideas. One village or city is differentiated from the next as much by its physical infrastructure as by the thought processes that led to that infrastructure. Sure, Edinburgh sits upon a giant volcanic plug. But what differentiates it from Glasgow is more its people's concept of it as the capital, as the erstwhile seat of the Scottish Monarch and the concomitant cultural associations. The concept draws wealth and power. What differentiates it from London is as much igneous rock versus clay, as it is the concept of one being Scottish and the other English with their

assumed differentiations, true or not. These are differences of thought, and therefore, they are differences of philosophy.

THE BASICS

Philosophy is a drive for understanding of universal questions, at levels stretching from the general to universal. However, *philosophies* are more complex, being sets of beliefs about how reality is structured. The study of philosophy results in philosophies—theories of being, ideas, moralities, and so on. Indeed, philosophy is the study that has produced most of the other branches of knowledge, such as the sciences, mathematics, and law.

Mass movements like religions, political parties, pressure groups, cultures, and nations tend to be motivated by associated philosophies of various types. These philosophies tend to assert things about how the world is or how it operates, along the lines of certain standard branches of philosophy. We'll go over these in more depth in a moment, but in the Western tradition these branches tend to be reduced to:

Logic, or what your philosophy deems to be coherent and valid reasoning and how it deals with incoherency.

Epistemology, the philosophy of what knowledge is and what we can know.

Metaphysics, or the philosophy of what reality is.

Ethics, or the study of what we should do, and who and what is of moral worth.

Politics, how should power be exercised, for whose benefit, and

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how that works off ethics—or, in many cases, doesn't.

So, for a random example: a given polity might agree that truth is only achieved through formalized public debate (logic) and that no truth can be found through introspection. They may then hold that knowledge is made up of publicly-debated hypotheses, and a hypothesis that achieves a majority of Elder votes is true (epistemology). As such, only in these

moments of debate are humans truly real, and outside them, we are but pale shadows of ourselves (metaphysics). From this, they may agree that it is acceptable to cheat and mislead other sentient beings outside of debate and for them to take revenge, but to perform either activity inside a formal debate is an ultimate sin (ethics). Finally, they may order that the political structures of the polity (for example, the state's monopoly on violence) should be focused on maintaining the purity of these debating arenas by restricting access and executing those who fail to meet their standards, whilst allowing the wider state to govern itself, and only enforcing those rules that the polity has voted to be true.

Already, with a few philosophical lines sketched in and no racial, geographical, historical, cartographical, or technological commitments, we've created a unique society that would make for a solid, if dystopian, culture for worldbuilding. An outsider from our world coming into a city following this philosophy might see it as dangerous, with property and life of little worth, and inflexible core laws. However, if they could somehow get access to the arena and convince enough of the citizens through debate, they could turn the state's power to their own ends. It is a nation easily led by demagogic orators.

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THE BRANCHES

LOGIC & EPISTEMOLOGY

Logic is about ratiocination—that is, what constitutes correct reasoning. Though multiple logical systems have been conceived of, we are most familiar with the deductive—such as, “If A then B. A. Therefore B.” In terms of worldbuilding, though, it’s hard to use unfamiliar systems of reasoning given the difficulty in explaining them outside of our own rational structures.

What we can focus on are “premises.” Most philosophies are built on just a few core beliefs—such as the world being flat or that all humans are born equal or that god is made of flying spaghetti. How these premises work with one another, how they contradict one another, and how a philosophy’s system of logic treats contradiction are also useful tools for worldbuilding.

We can also look at how these philosophies come into being. Are they the product of scholarly inquiry by teachers, monks, wizards and the like? Or are they

the product of social wisdom, deduced without formal reasoning and rigor? To an astronomer, a planet is different from a star or comet as it moves across the heaven in predictable, repeatable ways; to a peon in a field, the same planet might be the evening star and morning star; and to a hierophant, it might be the corpse of an undead god imprisoned in the heavenly vault. The astronomer may entertain many theories; the peon may seize on whichever he conceives of first; the hierophant may receive an idea from a god or a book and be stalwart in its defense, against all evidence.

Given these differences, it’s also worth noting at this point two more elements. That a given culture’s philosophy doesn’t have to be either a) coherent or b) complete.

By “coherent,” I mean that the elements of a philosophy don’t have to make sense given our own standards of logic, or even by their own. For example, the Roman Catholic Church at one time believed both that all truth was

to be found in the New and Old Testaments and that the Bishop of Rome was infallible in his dictates. These two precepts could and did clash sometimes, and it was (and is) up to individuals in that religion and society to decide which elements of the philosophy they chose to adhere to. The richness an enshrined contradiction gives to a belief system and world cannot be understated.

By “complete,” I mean that a built culture doesn’t have to address every aspect of philosophy. It’s perfectly feasible to have cultural philosophies that say little or nothing about metaphysics, or disagree about it. For example, American pragmatism says nothing about the underlying structure of reality, nor does utilitarianism. A flat earther doesn’t have to say anything about general relativity. And so on.

Epistemology is the study of what knowledge is, what we can know, and how we acquire it. Obviously, this means it’s closely related to logic but is more focused on whether we can actually know

things at all. It’s harder to use in worldbuilding, but it does introduce the element of uncertainty—cultures that claim knowledge is impossible or that knowledge only comes from revelation would make for interesting aberrations. George Orwell’s *1984* has the ruling Party monopolizing all information, whilst making it so thoroughly censored and distorted that knowledge is abandoned in favor of adherence to their creed.

However, an element of epistemology also ties into linguistics. Wittgenstein argued that language itself constrains knowledge and logic—that language games around the words we use mean that some cultures tie themselves in logical knots trying to clarify concepts. For example, in French, “conscience” means both conscience and consciousness.¹ To an English scholar these are fundamentally distinct, but a French philosopher has to disentangle the concepts. Designers of conlangs can have great fun removing or mixing words to make concepts difficult to express—or going the other way, by giving a language a rich excess of them (for example, in England there are endless words for “small bread” (batch, bun, bap, barm, cob, roll, tea-cake, muffin, scuffer, stottie...)² or “rain” (drizzle, torrent, flurry, shower, deluge, downpour, “cats and dogs,” tipping, pissing, luther-ing, plothering, sheeting, raining stair-rods...)).³

METAPHYSICS

Now, this is meaty stuff for worldbuilders. Metaphysics is the study of what *is* and reality itself. That is, the categories of being, objects and their traits, space and time, causation, and so on. It’s the precursor to modern science, chemistry, biology, and particularly fundamental physics.

So what are the fundamentals of reality in your world? How does your magic system work, and what distinguishes it from physics? Are there souls, daemons, and gods, and what distinguishes them from ordinary matter? Does the universe exist independently of minds, or does it require their presence to exist? How does an object or person remain themselves over time?

In our world, modern fundamental physics has narrowed the explanatory gaps where magic, souls, angels, and so forth could live—the god of the gaps has practically shrunk away. But that doesn’t mean your world has to be the same—this is the area of worldbuilding where you can come up with crazy fundamental rules that will have repercussions throughout your worlds.

ETHICS & POLITICS

Whereas the other philosophical arenas can fundamentally affect the physical structures of your world, ethics and politics are about nothing physical—they are beliefs in people’s heads. (Or at least they are in our world—again, your metaphysics could have ideas and beliefs instantiated in the physical world.)

Ethics is the study of what we should do—that is, who and what is of moral worth, and what actions are good or evil. It’s a rich, deep field for worldbuilding, as it extends across all thinking beings, whatever their place in your cosmos. A god has an ethical stance, as does a dog. For our purposes, though, we should look at larger-scale ethics and how they are enacted—which edges into politics.

The three main ethical strands focus on: how to maximize happiness (utilitarianism); how to be the best person (virtue ethics); and how to do the right thing (deontology or duty ethics). Different ethical theories have combined these and there is some overlap, but many constructed societies follow some combination of them. Others instead eschew a true ethical position, opting for a pragmatist or relativist philosophy where whatever is useful to survival is true.

Once a culture has an ethical theory, politics can be construed as the activity of enforcing it over

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO CREATING YOUR WORLD'S PHILOSOPHIES

STARTING POINTS

Decide where you're going to start. Philosophies can be introduced as a tool in worldbuilding at any stage of the process. My personal preference is to conceive of them as I create any significant social group in my world, to give them an ethos. Whatever point you introduce them at, think of the storytelling feel you want this group to have, then choose premises for them to share.

GO WIDER

Next, think what this combination of premises would say about each area of philosophy. What does it say about epistemology, metaphysics, or ethics? At this point, I'd consider whether you can invert any of the elements or deliberately introduce contradictions to create struggles inside that philosophy. For example, my metaphysics says that words cannot mislead, as each is a fragment of a perfect divine truth; yet my pragmatist ethics says that liars are liars and they must be punished. How can lies exist alongside a perfect language?

ETHICS AND POLITICS

How would these nascent philosophies affect politics? What societal fractures would appear from different interpretations and conflicts inside and between philosophies? Would it result in class structures or do the class structures cut across philosophies?

the dissonant ethical theories in your world. Some cultures have “inalienable” rights and concomitant duties with clear boundaries. Others are totalitarian, with the rulemakers able to intrude into any part of a person's life and even claim control over their thoughts—what Orwell called “thoughtcrime” in *1984*.

And then there is hypocrisy—the public statement of a society's or person's ethics balanced against actual behavior and actions. The superb worldbuilder Ursula K. Le Guin wrote a short story, “Those Who Walk Away from Omelas.” It perfectly models a society that has a certain public ethical stance, but is built on a private repudiation of it and how individuals in that society choose to cope—or “walk away.”

PHILOSOPHY AS WORLDBUILDING FUNDAMENTAL

Hopefully, I've demonstrated how the study of philosophy is a fruitful tool with which to approach worldbuilding. Its branches—epistemology, metaphysics, logic, and especially ethics/politics—each bring a different angle to constructed cultures and thought systems, whether they're coherent or in conflict. Philosophically rich worlds are endless engines for character motivation and conflict.

At each level of a society, at each scale of a society, there is room for the interaction and clashing of different philosophies and moralities. A world, a country, a nation, a religion, a tribe, a village, a school, a language, a family. All can have different philosophies in conflict with one another; in gossip, in politics, in debate, in war. They can be incoherent, incomplete, messy, and personal. So much richness can be built for your worlds, without saying anything about the world itself.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Sandor Goodhart, “Conscience, Conscience, Consciousness,” essay in *Remembering for the Future* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 1024–39, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-66019-3_68.
- 2 Katie Mather, “Bun! A Taxonomy of the British Bread Roll,” *Pellicle*, February 4, 2024, <https://www.pelliclemag.com/home/2021/2/15/bun-a-taxonomy-of-the-british-bread-roll>.
- 3 Ryan Starkey, “100 British Words for Rain,” *Starkey Comics* (blog), June 17, 2023, <https://starkeycomics.com/2019/03/14/100-british->

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